

BELFAGOR: THE DEVIL WHO MARRIED

[The date is unknown; both early and late ones have been suggested. Though the handwriting of the autograph manuscript might furnish a clue, no one has attempted to use it.]

According to Bandello (I Novelli 40) Machiavelli had some reputation for the narrating of stories; at least that storyteller speaks of him as a splendid and eloquent speaker of Tuscan, who on a certain occasion was begged to relate one of his pleasing stories. The only independent story that has come down to us is BELFAGOR, unprinted until after the author's death.

The simple plot is a variation of the old theme later stated by Ben Jonson as THE DEVIL IS AN ASS. Akin to Machiavelli's other writings is the satire on aspects of Florentine life—vividly presented—and the picture of Satan as the just and wise ruler of a well-regulated principedom.]

ONE CAN READ IN THE ANCIENT RECORDS OF FLORENTINE affairs, just as one can also hear the story told, about a very holy man whose life was praised by everybody who lived in those times; in the ecstasy of his prayers, he learned that as countless numbers of wretched souls who died under God's displeasure went to Hell, all or most of them complained that they were brought to such great misfortune by nothing else than by getting married. By this Minos and Radamanthus and the other judges of Hell were much astonished. And though they could not believe that such slanders as those men spoke against the female sex were true, and yet such complaints grew greater every day, they gave Pluto a proper report of it all. He resolved to make a full examination of the matter with all the princes of Hell, and then to decide on the method judged best for revealing its falsehood or completely finding out its truth.

Calling them therefore to council, Pluto spoke to this effect:

My dear friends, even though by Heaven's decrees and by decision of Fate, entirely beyond repeal, I possess this kingdom, and for it I cannot be under obligation to any judgment, either heavenly or earthly, yet, since it is the highest prudence for those who are most powerful to be most subject to the laws and most

to esteem the judgment of others, I have determined, in an affair that might result in some shame to our empire, to get your advice on how I ought to conduct myself. Because, since the souls of all the men who come to our kingdom say that their wives caused it, and since this seems to us impossible, we fear that if we pronounce judgment in accord with this tale, we shall be slandered as too credulous, and if we do not pronounce it, as not severe enough and hardly lovers of justice. And because the first sin is that of light-minded men and the second of unjust ones, and since we wish to escape the reproaches that might result from either one, but have not found a way to do it, we have summoned you that you might aid us with your counsel and be the reason why this kingdom, as in the past it has been without infamy, may continue in the same way in the future.

To each of those princes the matter seemed very significant and of great consequence, but though they all came to the conclusion that it was necessary to find out the truth about it, they were divided on the method. For one advised that they should send one devil, others that they should send several, into the world, so that in the form of a man he could personally learn what was true. Many others supposed that it could be done without so much trouble, since by means of various tortures they could force various souls to reveal it; yet because the greater number advised that somebody be sent, they adopted that opinion. So, finding nobody who would volunteer for this mission, they determined to make their selection by lot. This fell on Belfagor, an archdevil, but earlier, before he fell from Heaven, an archangel. Though he undertook this duty very unwillingly, nevertheless, under the compulsion of Pluto's authority, he consented to carry out all that was decided in the council, and pledged himself to those conditions that were solemnly resolved on among them.

These were that the devil appointed for this business should at once receive a hundred thousand ducats, with which he was to go into the world, and in human form to take a wife and live with her ten years; then, pretending to die, he was to return and as a result of his experience testify to his superiors on the burdens and annoyances of marriage. The council also settled that during the said time he should be subject to all the troubles and evils to which men are subject, and which result in poverty, imprisonment, sickness and all

the other misfortunes that men incur, unless he could free himself from them with fraud or with cleverness.

So Belfagor accepted the conditions and the money and came to the world; providing himself abundantly with horses and attendants, he entered Florence very honorably. This city before all others he chose as his home, because it seemed to him most fit to support one who employed his funds in money-lending. Taking the name of Roderigo of Castile, he rented a house in the Street of All Saints,¹ and so that his situation would not be found out, he said that when he was a child he had left Spain and gone to Syria, and in Aleppo had gained all his property; that he had left that place to come to Italy so he could take a wife in regions more civilized and more suited to a well-ordered life and to his own taste. Roderigo was a very handsome man and seemed to be about thirty years old; and in a few days, after he had made evident what great wealth he possessed and had given examples of his kindness and liberality, many noble citizens who had plenty of daughters and little money made proposals to him. Among all these women, Roderigo chose a very beautiful girl named Onesta, daughter of Amerigo Donati, who had three others—along with three grown-up sons—and these daughters were almost ready for marriage. Though this man was of a very important family and greatly respected in Florence, nonetheless, considering his bevy of children and his social position, he was very poor. Roderigo provided a magnificent and spectacular wedding, omitting nothing expected in such festivities. Moreover, since by the rules established for him when he left Hell, he was subject to all human passions, he at once began to take pleasure in the honors and splendors of the world and to set store on being praised by men—something that caused him no little expense.

Besides this, he had not been long married to his Madam Onesta before he fell excessively in love with her; he could not be contented if ever he saw her sad or displeased. Madam Onesta had brought into the house of Roderigo, along with her social position and her beauty, such great pride that Lucifer's was never so great; in fact Roderigo, who had tested both of them, considered that of his wife greater; yet it became far loftier as soon as she realized her husband's love for her, and since she felt she could in every way lord it over him, she gave him orders without any mercy or consideration and did not

1. *Borgo Ognisanti, in the western part of Florence.*

hesitate, when he denied her anything, to sting him with rude and offensive words. This caused Roderigo unimagined distress. Yet nevertheless his father-in-law, her brothers, her family, the bonds of marriage, and above all, his great love for her, made him patient. I shall pass over the great expense that, in order to satisfy her, he incurred in dressing her in the latest fashions and in satisfying her with the latest designs—which our city, following the habits natural to it, incessantly varies—because he was forced, if he was to remain at peace with her, to help his father-in-law marry off his other daughters, on which he spent a huge sum of money. After that, if he wanted to get on well with her, he had to send one of her brothers into the Levant with woollens, another to the West with silks, and the third to open a goldbeater's shop in Florence. In these affairs he laid out the greater part of his fortune.

Beside this, at Carnival time and on Saint John's day, when all the city was celebrating according to its ancient custom and many noble and rich citizens were getting reputations with splendid banquets, Madam Onesta, so that she would not be inferior to other wives, wanted her Roderigo to outdo all the others in such feasts. He submitted to all these things for the reasons given above; and though they were very expensive, they would not have seemed expensive to him if they had produced tranquillity in his house and if in peace he had been able to wait for the time of his ruin. But the reverse happened; along with unbearable expenses, her arrogant disposition caused him countless difficulties. No servants or workers in his house could endure her even for a very few days, much less for a long time. This caused Roderigo great embarrassment because he could not keep any trusted servant who took a real interest in his affairs; it went so far that even those devils he had brought with him to act as servants chose to go back to Hell and live in the fire rather than stay in the world under her rule.

Since Roderigo, then, was leading this vexatious and unquiet life, and with his unregulated expenses had by now used up all the money he had reserved, he came to living on the hope of the remittances he was waiting for from the West and the East; and since he still had good credit, in order not to be without what he wanted, he borrowed money. Before long, then, so many of his notes were in circulation that they were observed by those engaged in that sort of business on the Exchange. And when his position was already deli-

cate, at the same moment news came from the East and the West that one of Madam Onesta's brothers had gambled away all of Roderigo's money that he had, and that the other, returning on a ship loaded with his goods, entirely uninsured, had been drowned along with them. No sooner did these things become known than Roderigo's creditors held a meeting and, judging that he was bankrupt and yet that they could not act openly against him because the day of payment had not come, decided it would be prudent to watch him so closely that—following word with act—he could not get away secretly.

Roderigo, on the other hand, not seeing any way to better his case and knowing all that the laws of Hell required of him, determined to run away—no matter what. So one morning he mounted his horse and, since he lived near the Prato Gate,² went out through it. His departure was no sooner known than his creditors were in an uproar; applying to the magistrates, they set out in pursuit not merely with the police but with a crowd. Roderigo, when the outcry was raised behind him, was not a mile from the city. Hence, seeing that he was in a bad fix, he determined, in order to get away more secretly, to leave the road and try his fortune across the fields. But since he was impeded in doing this by the many ditches that cross the country and kept him from going on horseback, he tried to get away on foot, leaving his horse in the road and moving from field to field, concealed by the vines and canebrakes with which that country is covered. Near Peretola he came to the house of Gianmatteo del Brica, one of Giovanni del Bene's tenants, where by chance he found Gianmatteo, who had come home to feed his cattle. From this man Roderigo asked aid, promising that for saving him from the hands of his enemies, who were pursuing him to shut him up in prison until he died, he would make the farmer rich and would before he went away give such proof that Gianmatteo would believe him. If he did not carry out his promise, he was willing to let Gianmatteo put him in the hands of his enemies. Though Gianmatteo was a farmer, he was a man of resolution. Judging that he could not lose by deciding to save Roderigo, he gave his promise and, hurrying him to a great pile of stable manure he had in front of his house, covered him with reeds and other refuse that he had gathered to burn. Roderigo was

2. The western gate north of the Arno; see the end-papers.

scarcely well hidden when his pursuers arrived, but with all the threats they could make to Gianmatteo, they never got out of him that he had seen Roderigo. Hence, going farther on, and hunting for him in vain that day and the next, they returned worn out to Florence.

Then Gianmatteo, when the outcry was over and he had taken Roderigo from his hiding place, asked him to fulfill his promise. To this Roderigo answered: "My brother, I am under a great obligation to you, and I fully intend to satisfy it, and that you may believe I can do so, I shall tell you who I am." Then he told him who he was and the conditions laid upon him when he left Hell and about the wife he took; and besides he told him how he intended to make him rich. In short, it was this: When Gianmatteo heard that any woman was possessed by a spirit, he might be sure that Roderigo was the devil possessing her; and he would never leave her until Gianmatteo came to drive him out. This would give the farmer a chance to ask whatever pay he wanted to from the relatives of the woman. Ending in that way, Roderigo disappeared.

Many days did not pass until it was reported all over Florence that one of Messer Ambruogio Amidei's daughters, whom he had given in marriage to Bonaiuto Tebalducci, was possessed by a demon; her relatives did not fail to employ all the remedies that are used in such cases, applying to her San Zanobi's skull and San Giovanni Gualberto's mantle. All these things were made ridiculous by Roderigo. And to make plain to everybody that the disease of the girl was a spirit and not something fanciful, she spoke in Latin and debated philosophical matters and revealed the sins of many; among these she revealed those of a frate who for four years had kept in his cell a woman dressed like a novice. These things made everybody wonder. Meanwhile Messer Ambruogio was very unhappy. Having in vain tried every remedy, he had lost all hope of curing her, when Gianmatteo came to see him and promised health for his daughter if he agreed to give him five hundred florins to buy a farm at Peretola. Messer Ambruogio took his offer. Then Gianmatteo, first having certain masses said and going through some ceremonies to give the affair a good appearance, came close to the ear of the girl and said: "Roderigo, I have come to see you, so you will keep your promise to me." To this Roderigo answered:

I am well pleased. But this is not enough to make you rich. And for that reason, when I leave here I shall enter into the daughter of Charles, King of Naples; and I shall never leave except by your means. He then will see that you get a proper reward. After that you will give me no more trouble.

And having said this, he left the girl, to the pleasure and wonder of all Florence.

No long time passed by after that until news of the misfortune that had come to the daughter of King Charles was spread all over Italy. Finding no cure, the King, learning about Gianmatteo, sent to Florence for him. When he got to Naples, after some feigned ceremonies he cured her. But Roderigo, before he left, said:

You see, Gianmatteo, I have kept my promise to make you rich. And since I have no further obligation, I am no longer liable to you for anything. So be so kind as not to bother me any more, because if up to now I have done you good, in the future I shall do you harm.

Returning then to Florence very rich (for he had received from the King above fifty thousand ducats), Gianmatteo planned to enjoy his riches in peace, not at all expecting that Roderigo would plan to molest him. But this notion of his was suddenly disturbed, for news came that a daughter of Louis VII King of France was possessed by a spirit. This news completely changed Gianmatteo's expectations, as he reflected on the power of that king and the words Roderigo had spoken to him. The king, then, finding no cure for his daughter and learning of Gianmatteo's skill, first simply sent one of his officers to ask his aid. But since the farmer indicated certain reasons against it, the king was obliged to request the Signoria to send him. It compelled Gianmatteo to obey. So when, completely disconsolate, he had gone to Paris, he first explained to the king that it was certain that in the past he had cured some who were possessed with demons, but that it did not for that reason follow that he knew how or was able to cure all such, because some of them were of such a rascally disposition that they feared neither menaces nor incantations nor any religious ceremony. But all the same he would do what he could, and if he did not succeed he asked to be excused and pardoned. To which the King answered in anger that if he did not cure her he would be hanged. At this Gianmatteo was much distressed, yet,

plucking up his courage, he had the possessed princess come. Getting close to her ear, he humbly asked aid from Roderigo, emphasizing the benefit done him and the great ingratitude he would show by deserting Gianmatteo in such necessity. To which Roderigo answered:

What! Wretched traitor, do you have the rashness to come before me? Do you suppose I can let you boast of being made rich by my power? I am going to show you and everybody that I know how to give and take away everything as I choose; and before you go away from here I shall certainly get you hanged.

Hence Gianmatteo, not seeing at the time any other resource, determined to try his fortune in another way. So having the possessed princess leave, he said to the King:

Sire, as I have told you, there are many spirits so malicious that no proper dealings can be carried on with them, and this is one of that sort. Yet I am going to make a final effort; if it succeeds, Your Majesty and I shall have what we want; if it does not succeed, I shall be in your power, and you will have that mercy on me that my innocence deserves. So arrange to have set up in the square of Notre Dame a platform big enough to hold all your barons and all the clergy of this city; have the platform decorated with cloth of silk and of gold; set up in the middle of it an altar, and Sunday morning I want you and the clergy and all your princes and barons, with regal splendor, with gorgeous and rich costumes, to assemble there; after celebrating a solemn mass, have the possessed princess come to the place. Besides this, I need to have ready on one side of the square at least twenty persons with drums, horns, kettledrums, bagpipes, shawms, cymbals and noise-makers of every sort; these men, when I lift my hat, will strike up on their instruments and as they play will come toward the platform. These proceedings, along with certain other secret remedies, I believe will make this spirit go away.

Everything was at once arranged by the King, and when Sunday morning came and the platform was full of dignitaries and the square full of people, after mass was celebrated, the possessed princess was escorted to the platform by two bishops and many lords.



The expulsion of a devil from one possessed. A wall painting by Taddeo di Bartolo from the Museo Communale—formerly the city hall—of San Gimignano. Machiavelli visited the town at least twice (Ridolfi, Vita di Machiavelli, p. 148). (Fontenelli photograph)

When Roderigo saw such an assembly of people and such great preparation, he was almost stunned and said to himself:

What does this vile coward think he can do? Does he believe he can awe me with this splendor? Doesn't he know that I am used to seeing the splendors of Heaven and the furies of Hell? I shall certainly punish him.

And when Gianmatteo came close and begged him to come out, he said:

Oh, you have a fine idea! What do you think you can accomplish with these preparations of yours? Do you expect through them to escape my power and the wrath of the King? Vile rascal, I shall not fail to get you hanged.

So with one of them repeating his prayers and the other insulting him, Gianmatteo decided he could lose no more time. When he gave the signal with his hat, all those assigned to making noise struck up on their sound-makers, and with noises that rose to the sky came toward the platform. At the noise Roderigo pricked up his ears; not knowing what it could be and feeling greatly astonished, in a complete daze he asked Gianmatteo what it was. Gianmatteo in great excitement replied: "Alas, my Roderigo! That is your wife who is coming to get you." It was wonderful to observe what change of spirit came on Roderigo when he heard the word *wife* spoken. It was so great that, not thinking whether it were possible or reasonable that she was there, without answering further, full of terror he fled, leaving the girl free. He preferred to return to Hell to give an accounting for his deeds rather than again with such great annoyance, anxiety and danger to put his neck under the marriage yoke. Thus Belfagor, returning to Hell, gave assurance about the ills that a wife can bring into a house. And Gianmatteo, who was shrewder than the devil, in complete happiness returned home.